Should Video Games be Considered as Art?

Community NerdyBirdy Sep 30, 2021

What is Art?

In 1865, the French painter Edouard Manet first exhibited his painting, *Olympia*, in the Paris Salon. *Olympia*, which depicts a nude woman being brought flowers while lying on her bed, caused immediate public outrage. The painting was viciously condemned by art critics and the larger public, with the frenzy reaching a fever pitch when one viewer attempted to slash the canvas.

Interestingly, the reason for the painting's scandal was less the subject matter than its artistic style. In contrast to the time period, which emphasized realism and an accurate portrayal of subject matter, Manet proceeded with a transparent approach that never attempted to mimic reality.

Olympia is painted with clearly visible brushstrokes and little regard for color or depth of space. With her disproportionate body dimensions, no one would mistake the woman in *Olympia* as anything other than a painting. Following his foray into a new creative direction, Manet was ruthlessly mocked and criticized, and dejectedly left for Spain that very same year.

The Boundaries of Artistic Expression

Fortunately, we no longer hold such rigid views on art as the 19th century Paris Salon. The concept of art as inherently subjective is readily accepted.

And it’s now considered an intuitive article of faith that what one person derides as common, another might laud as artistic. Yet there are still many practices that while clearly artistic in production, are not granted the same level of respect.

Video games are one example. Although video games now make up a substantial portion of our entertainment economy, and are one of the most commonly cited hobbies among the general population, they are still often derided as a bad habit, childish entertainment, or even a waste of time.

This attitude would be understandable for the early video games that emerged from the culture of mall arcades, movie theaters and theme parks. Designed to attract teenagers willing to part with their quarters and tokens while they waited for their next ride or movie to start, early game designs were simplistic creations with straightforward objectives. There was little artistic nuance to be found for example, in a game of *Pac-Man*.

But by the 90’s, game design included cutting-edge visuals, rich and intricate storytelling and impressive musical soundtracks. Games such as *The Secret of Mana*, *Donkey Kong Country* or *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* transcended the arcade atmosphere to create unique gaming experiences that resonated with audiences. The era of gaming as a medium of mediums had begun.

A Collective Artistic Experience

Every video game is created from a coalition of artistic and creative teams. There are the writers who write the plot and storyline of the game. Designers who build and code each aspect of the visual experience. And composers who score the game, providing the soundtracks, effects, and dialogues that give the game its audio form. It’s indisputable that each of the individual aspects of game design are artistic endeavors.

For instance, many notable composers, designers and writers have made lasting contributions to the gaming industry. The award-winning animation studio Studio Ghibli designed and developed the game *Ni No Kuni*, and the Grammy Award-winning composer Michael Giacchino composed the score for games in the *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* series. The British writer Meg Jayanth even won an award from the UK Writer’s Guild for her work on the video game *80 Days*.

And yet, when all these artistic elements come together into a cohesive whole, some critics drop the artistic label. Why? Because for some critics, the element of gamification, or objective goals for the user, turn the experience into a product. The late film critic Roger Ebert stated that “One obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game. It has rules, points, objectives and an outcome. [Someone] might cite an immersive

game without points or rules, but I would say then it ceases to be a game and becomes a representation of a story, a novel, a play, dance, a film. Those are things you cannot win; you can only experience them".

But is not all art a representation? A painting is simply pigments and binders spread over canvas and music just sounds at different pitches and tones. None of those ingredients are particularly interesting in isolation, but when brought together as a representation, they gain a life of their own. A video game has an objective for its user, but what piece of art doesn't? It's truly fanciful and pretentious to believe that artists create art for no objective other than to fulfill their artistic whims and desires. Possessing an objective should not be grounds for exclusion of all artistic merit.

Changing Opinions

While there may still be critics who refuse to acknowledge video games as art, it's clear the tide is turning. *The British Academy of Film and Television Arts* (BAFTA) have included a category for "outstanding creative achievement" in the video game industry since 2003 and the *Smithsonian American Art Museum* has hosted exhibits on the art of video games. As critical receptions and opinions on gaming move towards greater acceptance of video games as artistic expression, it's fitting to return to the story of Edouard Manet.

After his rejection at the Paris Salon, Manet traveled widely to find an audience for his art. Meeting with other painters eager for a new direction such as Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, Manet helped them embark on a new artistic vision that would later become the dominant artistic movement of the 19th century. As one of the original members of the Impressionists, Manet is considered by many today to be the father of Modernism.

It might be a while before video game stills and screenshots are hanging in the halls of the *Louvre*. But the genre of video games is gaining more respect. Obviously not every video game ever produced could be considered a work of art. But every gamer has played games that prompt an emotional response as powerful as any novel, painting or film.

What are some examples of games that you feel deserve to be considered works of art? Which games do you think are some of the most artistic? Do you agree or disagree that gaming is a form of art?